

Off the Grid in the Natural State

“To properly understand political power and trace its origins, we must consider the state that all people are in naturally. That is a state of perfect freedom of acting and disposing of their own possessions and persons as they think fit within the bounds of the law of nature. People in this state do not have to ask permission to act or depend on the will of others to arrange matters on their behalf. The natural state is also one of equality in which all power and jurisdiction is reciprocal and no one has more than another. It is evident that all human beings – as creatures belonging to the same species and rank and born indiscriminately with all the same natural advantages and faculties – are equal amongst themselves. They have no relationship of subordination or subjection unless the lord and master of them all had clearly set one person above another and conferred on him an undoubted right to dominion and sovereignty.”

- John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*

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It was August, 2011. A multitude of bells rattled and clanked from the distance and were accompanied by the bleating of goats. Sunlight poured through the canvas tent like grain through a sieve. The heat of summer smothered me out of slumber. I opened my eyes and blinked to clear the dust from them. I looked around at the things in the tent: a bookshelf stretching from the back end to the front along one side, on top of which lay strangely-shaped and colorful rocks; guns tucked in the corner behind the bookshelf; the guitar and the daitos, wooden replicas of Japanese swords used in practice of various martial arts.

I was a single man, newly graduated from Arkansas State University–Heber Springs, when I visited here about two years ago. That was before the goats. I was here now with my wife of just nine months who was about a month along in her pregnancy.

My old friend Benjamin came out here to start a new life. He had gotten cheated out of his \$200,000 business in Little Rock in an attempt to sell it. He sold his old property in Shirley, Arkansas, put half the earnings in savings and sunk the other half in a large sailboat that he kept docked off the coast of Greece—just another in a long line of failed attempts. His wife miscarried on the boat, and so they returned to Arkansas.

I sat up, waking my wife in the process.

“Good morning,” I told her with a smile.

“Good morning.” She yawned. The goats bleated again, this time sounding louder.

I kissed her lightly. “I guess we should go see if there’s anything to do. Are you hungry?”

“Very. So is the baby.”

We got out of bed, put on our clothes, and exited the tent. The day met us with a full burst of heat. The trees were alive and basking in the summer sun. Up the dirty trail we saw Nathan, the elder boy, being led by a sea of goats. The goats shoved and pushed their way in a fight for leadership. The dark 16-year-old carried a stick that he bounced occasionally on the toe of his shoe. He smiled and waved at us.

The goats passed us by in a flurry of jumping spots and flapping ears, and Nathan stood before us.

“Good morning,” he said as he looked up the trail. His Korean descent from his mother’s side was evident in his dark, sleek eyes that always seemed to smile.

“What do we need to do?” I asked him.

“Go see Dad,” he said. “He probably wants you to help him with Josiah’s platform. I’m headed that way, just follow me.”

I looked at Nikky. We nodded and began walking down the trail. The silence was disturbed only by the creek that fluttered and rolled all along the way and by the faint buzzing of insects and the goats baaing ahead of us. None of us said a word on the walk, but Nikky and I laughed at the curiosity in the goats’ eyes and in their light, joyful hops.

As we neared the bottom of the trail, I saw Benjamin getting the work site ready for the day’s construction. He moved around in a flurry, scooping up logs, loading them on his shoulders, dumping them closer to where the platform sat that would serve as the floor to the next tent—the next home—that was going up. This one was for the younger boy, Josiah, who was strangely absent from the big clearing in the woods, the headquarters of the homestead. He must have slept in. That’s what I did when I was 14.

Benjamin looked up at us, already covered in sweat. He waved, set down the tools he was carrying, and strode down the steep hill towards the creek, which flowed just opposite the main tent that we were now standing at.

“Weeeeeell... Mornin’!” came his familiar high-pitched, singsong voice. He walked up to us. His short beard dripped with sweat, but his eyes looked alive and ready to face the day. I hoped I would be that strong and energetic when I got to be 43.

“Did y’all sleep well?” he asked when he got to us.

“We slept alright,” Nikky said. She looked sideways at me and suppressed a smile. She had complained about her back the night before because of the stiffness of the bed.

“Good, good.” He drew the words out in two separate musical notes. “Nathan, where’s your brother?”

“Sleepin’.”

“Sleeping?! Well go wake him up. The morning’s already over. We’ve got things we need to do today. We have *got* to get things in order around here.”

Three years of hardship deep in the national forest of Arkansas had done their damage to Benjamin’s once hopeful spirit. He sat down and shook his head slowly.

August, 2005. I had just been inducted into the Messianic Jewish congregation I would be part of for the next four years of my life. I would learn Hebrew, worship with fellow believers on all the Jewish holidays, work beside them, suffer with them. We would become a family.

Today is my first Sabbath with these folks. The men, all good ol’ boys from the south, sing and wag their long beards. We sing Christian praise songs and gospel hymns with a Jewish twist: Lines of Hebrew strewn into the mix of lyrics, and praises to Yeshua Hamashiach—Jesus the Messiah.

There in the front of the group, leading the music on the guitar, is a man that reminds me of a good friend of mine from my old church. He’s of average height, physically fit, and his dark brown hair and long brown beard give him the appearance of an outlaw from the wild west. But he sings those Jewish songs in a high pitch, like Paul Simon who, I would later learn, is one of

his favorite artists. His Jewish fringes, four sets of white strings with a single deep blue strand in each set, hang just below his tan T-shirt and over his faded blue jeans. The cuffs of his pants are accidentally tucked behind the tongues of his brown leather work boots. I think for a moment that he looks like a dirty redneck (the kind I've always disdained), but I can't deny his talent.

The songs end and we all sit to discuss the Torah portion. Each Sabbath there is a Jewish obligation to read a predetermined section of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, so that a few chapters are read each week until in one year's time you read the entire text. On the same annual holiday each year the cycle starts over with Genesis 1:1.

The musician sits with his legs kicked out and crossed in the seat in front of him. We all face the front, where Yaakov, the presiding elder this week, leads the service. It's strange to me how different this service is from every church service I've been to. The men raise their hands and speak right in the middle of the service, commenting on the text, debating the finer points of it. The musician is the most opinionated of all of them. He's already lambasted the government and modern society over and over, and mocked the traditional Christian interpretation of several of the passages we've read. Then again, they all do that, it seems.

The service has ended, and we're all filling plates from the kitchen area with all of the hot meals different families have prepared for the evening, a weekly tradition from what the elder's wife told me. Some people have gone outside on the front porch to smoke. I find it strange that so many of them smoke cigarettes while they refuse to eat pork or shellfish or any of the animals forbidden by the strict Torah law.

I'm sitting at a far table by myself, listening to the bustling building full of voices and laughter and finding it ironic that I'm off a back road in Jacksonville, Arkansas with a bunch of reformed Christians whose lives are morphing into Jewish ones. The musician pulls up a chair next to me and spins it around, sitting back and spreading his legs haphazardly. His boots thud on the wooden floor as he slams them down.

"So what's your name?"

"Aaron," I answer. "Yours?"

"Benjamin. Nice to meet you."

We shake hands.

"So what do you think of all this?" he asks as he motions around the room.

"It's very...interesting. I don't really know what to make of it, to be honest. But I love the atmosphere. It's closer to *right* than I've ever felt in a church."

"Yeah, I think we all feel the same way," he answered.

"So what do you do?"

"For a living? I'm an animal trapper."

"You trap animals?" *This is getting weird*, I think to myself.

"Yeah, I work all over the state. Mostly in Little Rock though. The rich people in Chenal who have the money to throw to me. In return I get squirrels and skunks and other rodents out of their attics and basements. Or whatever they need gone. Then I repair the damage and ensure they don't come back." He nods and smiles with his eyebrows raised high.

I laugh.

"What about you?" he asks.

"I'm working with my brother-in-law. Learning to become an electrician."

"That's a good job. If you ever need something else, just come to me. I give all Sabbaths and Jewish holidays off. I pay pretty good, too."

"Thank you," I reply with a nod.

Josiah entered the tent with sleepy eyes. He was fumbling with his cell phone.

"There you are," Benjamin said.

His younger son looked similar to Nathan only shorter and with freckles spotting his tan face.

"Bout time," Benjamin said as he ruffled his hair and poked his ribs.

"Yeah, yeah," Josiah answered as he moved away from his father's teasing blows. A faint smile crept over his face.

"You sleep too much, boy. Go out there and get some eggs for breakfast."

He left the tent. Benjamin looked up at me. "You ready to get started?"

"Ready as I'll be," I answered.

We made our way back up the hill to the new platform. Benjamin started to measure for the rail while I went and dragged up the logs he called for to build it.

"Just wanted to say thanks for letting Nikky and me come out here to visit. This is something we want to do, eventually."

He looked at me. "Of course, brother. Any time. You know how I feel about free labor!" A giddy laugh followed. I smiled and nodded.

"Dad, we're ready!" Josiah called from the kitchen area. We looked at each other and headed back down.

After a light breakfast, Nikky and I went with Josiah to milk the goats. He led the goats—and us—to the goat pen up the mountain side. When we got there the smell of pine pricked my nose. We led the majority of goats into the pen. Then we put Nanny up on the milking table, and Josiah proceeded to milk her.

"Do you like it out here, Josiah?" I asked.

"Yeah." He was distracted.

"Do you ever miss the city?"

"Sometimes." He shrugged. "Wanna try?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Just grip here and pinch, then slide down while you put pressure on it. Roll the milk out."

I filled the tin can with milk.

When we got back to the main tent, Benjamin separated the hairs out of the milk and shared some with Nikky and me.

"Tastes like milk," Nikky said with a shrug. I gagged. Milk isn't my thing, and goat's milk is no exception.

The boys went off to play and do chores, and Nikky decided to take care of the dishes and start on some sort of lunch.

Benjamin and I made our way past the chickens and guineas, past the clearing that will soon be an irrigated field for gardening, and on the trail back to Benjamin's tent my wife and I had slept in the night before.

We talked about the news all along the way. Benjamin was slightly out of touch. Although he kept a few vehicles to get around out of the woods, a cell phone to communicate with his friends and loved ones, and a chainsaw, everything else stored in the large tents was fairly primitive: no TVs, no radios.

"I just can't *believe* this stuff is goin' on!" he exclaimed. "You know this whole financial crisis is rigged, don't you?"

"Of course I do," I answered.

"It's engineered. They're not concerned with helping the economy." He stared into my eyes. "They want it to fall."

"I know that. *They* manipulate the wealth according to their needs. We're the pawns."

I sat on the porch while he went in the tent. He came back a moment later with a pipe to commence another one of our rituals. He hit it and passed it to me. The smell was skunky and potent.

"Yeah, brother, I tell you what," he began. "I just can't believe Tiffany is leaving me. We've been married for 20 years now."

"That's a long time to just up and end things," I said. "I've known you all for a long time now. You're good people. You're a good father and you seem to be a good husband."

"Yeah," he said, "but she's just not satisfied with living in tents. I've studied the Scriptures over and over on this. It says a wise man readies his land *before* he builds his home. She wants a house or a cabin, but I've *got* to get this land ready first."

I looked away. I wondered if he remembered the parts of Scripture that talk about taking care of your family and providing for the needs of your wife. I said nothing.

"But I think my boys are gonna stay out here with me."

He surveyed his land. Forty acres of the national forest, bought and paid for by Benjamin.

"I'm ruined, Aaron. The woods have spoiled me. Every time I have to go back to Little Rock to do a job, I lose it. I can't stand being bombarded with their brainwashing. Have you heard Katy Perry's song ET? They are mocking us."

"You mean the aliens?" I smiled sardonically.

"The nephilim. I'm almost positive I've been abducted before."

Benjamin believes that the world governments are controlled by fallen angels under Satan's authority. There is Biblical evidence that these angels, who procreated with mankind before Noah's flood, have done so repeatedly throughout history in an effort to outbreed and destroy mankind. It's sort of Satan's answer to G-d's Israel. Benjamin believes they've infiltrated the upper classes. In his theory, which fits with the Biblical understanding, they have human bodies but they are soulless. In place of the human spirit breathed by the Almighty they are filled with demons. Benjamin thinks they formed our government (and most of modern society),

bought out mass media and the education system, and are now destroying the foundations of freedom, taking away one civil liberty at a time until the world is one giant totalitarian state devoted to the worship of Satan and his antichrist.

“Abducted? How can you tell?” I asked.

“There’s a small circular chunk of flesh missing from my right shin. I’ve read in several books that it’s a sign of alien abduction.”

I looked down at my own leg covered by my jeans. I looked at him with wide eyes as I pulled up the right pant leg, revealing an identical scar on my shin. He looked at it closely as his hand found its way up to his mouth.

“Nikky noticed it before I did, last year,” I told him. “Neither one of us could explain it.”

“I’m telling you man, you need to watch out,” he said. “They target specific people. I’m convinced the man who cheated me out of my business is one. But he’s lower level.”

“And you think I’m being targeted?”

He waited a moment. “They know the truth seekers.”

October, 2005. I call Benjamin up, bloodied from a nasty fall on the job wiring an old warehouse. My brother-in-law, despite his initial promises upon hiring me, says that business is picking up, and everyone has to start working Saturdays, with no exception. The bosses are asking me either to start working them or turn in my resignation. The Torah forbids work on the Saturday Sabbath, so after just three months of electrician work I decide to take Benjamin up on his offer. I’m going to become a trapper.

I would spend the next several months extracting animals from houses in the bitter chill of winter. I would learn how to drive a standard transmission, because the company trucks are all old Toyota pickups with stick shifts. I would have several onsite accidents, and would quickly determine along with my coworkers—who are all Messianic men from our little congregation—that I am somewhat accident prone. I would grow in my faith and the knowledge of it. And I would decide to go to college. Three years of grueling labor for businesses that I felt were unimportant in the eyes of Eternity had forced me into a mild depression and a heavy angst. I was an artist who had relegated himself to construction and the factories. I decide it’s time to learn what I love and get a degree. I’m going to earn a living while doing something true to me.

My opportunity comes when Benjamin announces to us that he’s selling the business. He’s spent too many hours away from his wife and kids, so he’s packing up and getting the hell out of Dodge. He will live off the coast of Greece, because “government may control the land now, but the ocean is freedom.”

He can have the ocean. I’m going to school.

Somewhere along the way I begin studying conspiracy theories. I begin researching quotes from the upper echelons of society, and most importantly, I begin researching the details of the September 11th, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center. My findings quickly lead me to form my own socio-political theories. I begin to hate our government and the system it perpetuates. The more I look at, the more evidence I find that the world is being duped.

I want to talk to Benjamin about it, but he's halfway around the world, going through some sort of midlife crisis. I wouldn't see him again for a couple of years.

"I already talked to the boys this morning," Benjamin said to me. "If y'all wanna come out here and do this with us, you're welcome to. We'd give you the big tent that Tiffany and the kids have been sleeping in. Now that the boys have their own tents and my wife won't be out here anymore."

"It's a tempting offer," I replied. "You know we want out of society as much as you do. But I've got debts, man. I've got 10 grand in school loans to pay back, and if I come out here now, how would I earn money to take care of that?"

"That is an issue," he responded. "I tell you what I've learned out here, though. Out here, the sounds and business of the outside world are silent. Out here, you can think. Out here, you learn what's really important in life. I'm convinced mankind should basically be living as paupers. That's what we're doing here. We don't go hungry, either. We work at our own pace, and we're always together as a family. Or, we were until Tiffany decided to leave."

I looked away. I thought about Nikky. When we met a couple of years ago, she was young and newly freed from her parents' home. Since we've met she's taken my ideas and run with them. She *craves* a natural life, close to the Earth and free from humanity's tampering.

"So do you know what the baby is yet?" he asked.

"It'll be a surprise. We're doing a home birth."

"With a midwife?" he asked.

"With a midwife."

"You'll be a good dad. I love my boys. When you have a boy, you get excited because you can teach him the things you know about being a man. But when I had my daughter, it was something else, brother..." A smile flashed on his face. "I felt like a prince coming out of that hospital. And when they love on you, you just feel like the king of the world."

His daughter was currently with his wife in town up the road. I had seen Benjamin and Ali playing together, and I knew what he meant. I could see it in the way he ran around with her on the playground at the park, and I heard it in his voice when he talked to her. He was a proud father, and she was a daddy's girl.

We smoked some more.

"How much debt do you have anyway?" he asked.

"Ten grand," I replied. "But it may go up. Now that we're having this baby and I'm going back to school, I don't know if we can make it without the loans. I've applied for them, but haven't accepted yet. If I do, it will be \$6–8,000 more."

"I wouldn't." His voice was rising. "It's a trap, brother."

I looked down and nodded. "I have to do *something*, Ben. You've got two decades on me. You've lived your life, had your family. You've earned some money so you could come out here and live the way you want. I'm not there yet."

"Look at me, Aaron."

He was serious now.

"I'm telling you like I would tell one of my boys. You need to give back that money."

He looked at me expectantly.

"I'm serious," he continued. "You need to give it back before it's too late. That debt is the claim they're going to have on you when they call in the debts. You'll be separated from your family. Maybe indefinitely. You need to come out here, with us."

"And what am I supposed to do about the debt I already have?"

"A lot of people think I'm crazy, so take this with a grain of salt. But if it was me, I'd sell your car, put the money in gold, and ask your dad to pay off your debt. Then you can pay him back without the threat of being arrested later on down the road."

"How?" I demanded. "How am I going to pay him back? I have to earn money."

"We'll start up a log furniture business."

I searched his face for irony. There was none.

"Nikky and the boys can start on the garden, start canning things, and you and I will make log furniture and sell it. I also want to get this place ready for guided tours and that kind of thing. Maybe start a survivalist course. There are ways to make money, brother, without selling your soul. You don't need more than that. Or you'll just wind up like everyone else: fat, lazy, and blind."

"I *know* the dangers, Benjamin. Don't you get it? I've been struggling with this stuff for a while now. I *want* the freedom this place has to offer. But my hands are tied right now."

"You *better* listen to what I'm saying, Aaron. You're going to ruin your life."

I looked away. "You did this *your* way. Let me do it my own way."

"Look," he said. "I'm not gonna be mad at you if you don't listen to me. But I want you to think about it. The offer is on the table, and I hope you act before it's too late. If I'm right about the timeline—and it's looking like I am—in less than a year society is going to collapse. You should be out here where the woods can take care of you. You won't be able to start once it happens. This," he said motioning around, "is where the future is."

We finished the platform by nightfall, with little said between us as we worked.

"Well, Ben, I think it's about time we head out."

He shook my hand. "Hope you're not mad at me." He smiled.

"Nah. I just need time to figure everything out. I appreciate your concern for me, though."

"Of course. I think of you like a brother."

"Me too," I replied.

Nikky and I drove our little stick shift out of Benjamin's woods, up the rutted drive, avoiding the rocks like mountain peaks that stabbed up into the air. Our excursion was over. We were going back to society. For a time, at least.

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"A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone."

- Henry David Thoreau